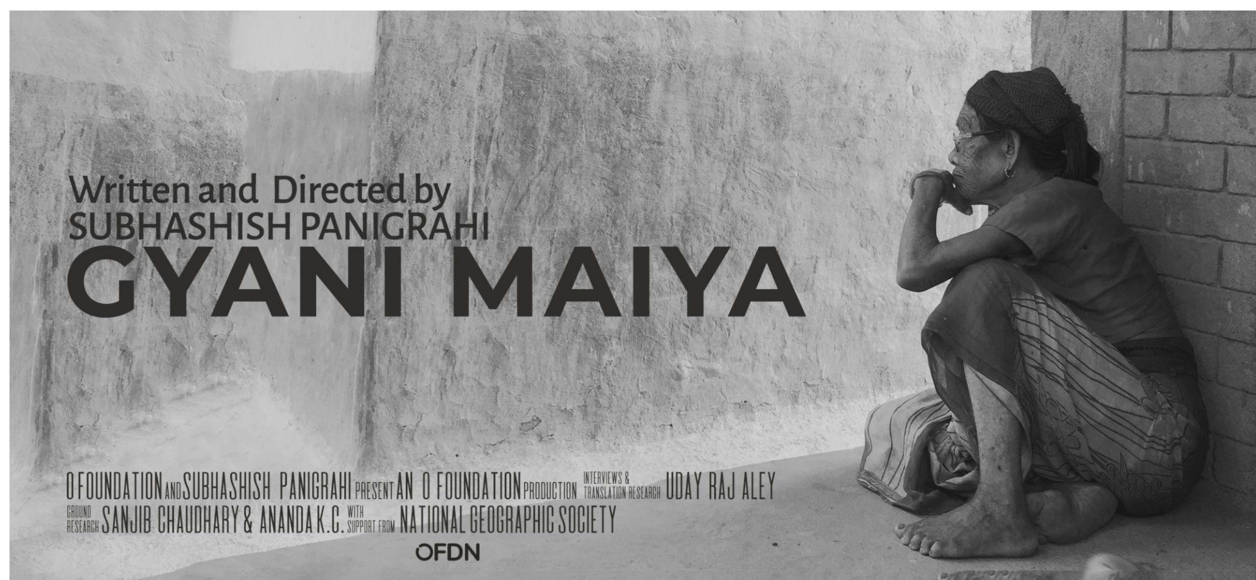
Gyani Maiya (2019 documentary)

Subhashish Panigrahi[1]

Abstract (Summary)

No community can express the pain of losing an elder, especially when she was the last fluent speaker of their language. This film is a journey through the life of Gyani Maiya Sen Kusunda who was presumed to be the last living native speaker of the Kusunda language of Nepal. With the new learning about her younger sister being a fluent speaker and an informal language education program for young children has brought some hope. It still remains a question what is ahead for Mihaq, the name the Gi Mihaq (Kusunda) people use for their language.



Theatrical poster (© Subhashish Panigrahi, CC-BY-SA 4.0. 2020)

***Author correspondence:** subhashish@theofdn.org
ORCID: 0000-0002-3665-8184

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Plot Summary

Gyani Maiya is a documentary film in the Kusunda language that was produced by Subhashish Panigrahi with funding support from National Geographic Society under the ambit of the OpenSpeaks initiative at the O Foundation. (Rajpal)

Gyani Maiya Sen-Kusunda died on January 25, 2020 in Kulmor village of Dang district in western Nepal, a year and half before this documentary was filmed. (Chaudhary) From leaving behind the life of a nomad to getting married to a non-nomad to raising a family that could not speak her language, Sen-Kusunda wished that the Kusunda language be taught to the newer generation. In her own words, “now none of the Mihaqs (Kusunda people) speak the language. The girls have got married and have left for the villages. Boys are getting married in villages. We left our language and started speaking other languages. It should be taught to others.” The plot of this film follows the story of the Kusunda people – narrated by Sen-Kusunda – who were once a nomadic community and are currently settled in villages. Over the years almost all the Kusundas have left speaking their language. (Panigrahi)

This documentary arguably contains the most detailed video interviews of Sen-Kusunda. Her younger sister Kamala Sen Khatri is the sole fluent speaker of the Kusunda language at the moment. Uday Raj Aaley, who plays a key role in this film has researched about the Kusunda language over the years and has published a Kusunda-Nepali dictionary.

Plot synopsis

The entire story of this film revolves around the narratives that the late Kusunda elder Gyani Maiya was kind to share.

Gyani Maiya Sen-Kusunda (IPA: d͡ʒɲaːni mɔijaː sen kusuɳɖaː) was born around 1937 in the Dang district of western Nepal. She was from a nomadic indigenous group called Kusunda/Mihaq that spoke the “Kusunda'' or “Gi Mihaq” (IPA: d͡ʒi mihaːk, meaning: the king’s language) language. Through a long process of inter-marriages, settling in villages and cultural assimilation, the Kusunda people started losing their language over time. Sen-Kusunda and her younger sister Kamala Sen Khatri remained the only two fluent speakers of the Kusunda language which is currently a critically endangered language. (Watters)

After the critical state of her language was known thanks to wider publications, many researchers and documentary linguists have attempted to document the language. Uday Raj Aaley, an independent and local researcher who authored a comprehensive Kusunda-Nepali-English dictionary has studied the language in detail through documenting oral history while having conversations with Sen-Kusunda. (Aaley and Bodt) He continues to teach local children the Kusunda language since 2018, even after the death of Sen-Kusunda.

The other key individual in this film was Uday Raj Aaley, a Nepalese researcher, translator and a native speaker of the endangered Magar language. Through working closely with Gyani Maiya Sen

Kusunda, he collected over the years more than 1,000 Kusunda-language words, and published a dictionary titled "*Kusunda Jaati ra Sabdakosh*". (K.C.) He was involved in this film in assisting with research and translation during and after filming. Aaley's personal interest in studying endangered languages of Nepal spans over years. He has studied several indigenous languages such as Kusunda, [Western] Tharu and Magar and has published his research widely.

Apart from the Kusunda dictionary, he is also the author of the book "*Tharu, A Revelation, Saga of Struggle and Survival*" and editor and compiler of a forthcoming Tharu dictionary. (Khatri) Aaley and Timotheus A. Bodt of SOAS University of London made 20 hours of audiovisual recordings interviewing Gyani Maiya Sen Kusunda and Kamala Sen Khatri, then the two fluent native speakers, and published the observations under open access. (Aaley and Bodt)

Director's note

I came across Gyani Maiya Sen Kusunda through the Global Voices article by my friend Sanjib Chaudhary. Learning about how soon the Kusunda language might disappear was really hard. Fortunately, there came an opportunity for us to document the life of Gyani Maiya in her own words. Sanjib and I along with another friend Ananda traveled to the Kulmor village in remote western Nepal where we were joined by researcher Uday Raj Aaley. Uday had been researching the Kusunda language and his constant conversation with Gyani Maiya resulted in a dictionary as well. The Global Voices article was about this dictionary. To me, it was such a great honor to meet everyone in one place, particularly Gyani Maiya who was in her mid eighties then.

We spent two days interviewing her and I could not appreciate how much supportive she and her family were to us in those two days. Unfortunately, we lost her in early 2020 and the time during the production was the last time I ever saw her. Kusunda still remains a highly endangered language with only one fluent native speaker, Gyani Maiya's younger sister Kamala. But the good news is Uday is teaching the local children the basics of the language. Seeing pictures of children receiving certificates for their Kusunda skills would have made Gyani Maiya very happy. Her last emotional words were the concern of her language dying.

- *Subhashish Panigrahi, Director*

Datasheet

Title	Gyani Maiya
Name in Nepali	ज्ञानी मैया
Name in International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)	d͡ʒɡjɑːn̪iː məɪjɑː

Director	Subhashish Panigrahi
Producer	Subhashish Panigrahi
Cast	Gyani Maiya Sen Kusunda (self), Uday Raj Aaley (self), Sanjib Chaudhary (self)
Country of production	India
Country of Origin	Nepal
Filming location(s)	Kulmor, Dang district, Nepal
Year of Production	2019
Release Dates	10 Dec 2019 (Nepal)
Duration	25 minutes (appx.)
Genre	Documentary
Distribution company	O Foundation (OFDN)
Production company	O Foundation (OFDN)
Digitization sponsorer	National Geographic Society
Screenwriter	Subhashish Panigrahi, Uday Raj Aaley, Sanjib Chaudhary
Music director	Subhashish Panigrahi
Recordist	Subhashish Panigrahi
Keywords	kusunda, Gi Mihaq, Mihaq, Nepal, indigenous, language, endangered, Dang, Lamahi, Kulmor
Budget	US$2,100 (estimated)
Film website	https://theofdn.org/film/gyani-maiya/
Permanent archive	Film (https://archive.org/details/gyani-maiya), Collection (https://archive.org/details/gyani-maiya-collection)
Entertainment Identifier Registry (EIDR)	10.5240/52AE-86BB-F84D-03B2-D938-U
doi **DOI**	http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/m9zk-9g68

IMDb IMDb	https://www.imdb.com/title/tt12728670/
Summary	No community can express the pain of losing an elder, especially when she was the last fluent speaker of their language.

Technical details

Film type	Documentary Feature
Language	Kusunda; Nepali
Spoken Languages	Kusunda; Nepali
Colour Info	Color
Frame Rate	24 fps
Aspect Ratio	2.35:1
Stereoscopy	No
Captions	English (Closed Caption), English (Open Caption)

Additional credits

Field research and translation	Uday Raj Aaley
Additional translation	Sanjib Chaudhary and Ananda K.C.
Advisor	Eddie Avila (Rising Voices)
Stills	Sanjib Chaudhary
Additional music	From Freesound: Pig Oink Cerdo Sound Effect, FX Sounds (CC-BY-SA 3.0). Andy_Gardner (CC0 1.0); Goat, LukeIRL (CC-BY 3.0); Walking barefoot on wooden deck.MP3. SoundsForHim (CCO 1.0); Stream, Water, C.wav, Inspector. (CC-BY 3.0); Mokroluskyt_padla.WAV. 13FPanska_Mokrolusky_Tomas (CC0 1.0); Bleating goats. Seenms. CC-BY 3.0. Additional Foley sounds recorded by Subhashish Panigrahi, CC-BY-SA 4.0.

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